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THE TIMELESSNESS
OF POETRY

BY

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THE TIMELESSNESS OF POETRY

IT is difficult to speak of poetry, at a moment when civilization itself, of which poetry is the expression and the fine flower, is in the balance. To the last war our young men went singing:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.

At the end, they were more disillusioned.

Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

There is not much singing now, even though maidens strewed lilac branches on the roads, as the English troops once more entered Belgium. Perhaps the present generation, with the experience of their fathers behind them, are more conscious of the grimness of the thing.

But I do not mean to say anything more to-day about war and poetry. Let us, for an hour, have what the theologians call a *refrigerium*, and think of poetry itself, as it has been throughout the ages, and some day, perhaps, may be again.

The poets themselves have left us many true and illuminating sayings about their own function, as they conceived it. 'There is none in the universe', declared Tasso, 'who merits the name of a creator, save God and the Poet.' Poetry, our own Sidney tells us, adds something to nature. 'Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry, as divers Poets have done, neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers: nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely.' Those words make even poetry itself more lovely. Shakespeare's poet is 'of imagination all compact'. Milton puts poetry before logic, as 'more simple, sensuous, and passionate'. Wordsworth says that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', and again that 'it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Shelley abounds in statements about poetry. It is 'the expression of the imagination'. It is 'something divine'. It is 'the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth'. It is 'the perfect and consummate bloom of all things; it is as the odour and colour of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it'. It is 'the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds'. It 'turns all

things to loveliness'. I put these passages together, partly because the poets ought to know best what poetry is, but mainly because, although some of them are rhetorical rather than analytic, they illustrate the swing of emphasis between the elements of emotion and imagination, which are present in poetry, as in every other form of art. Coleridge, in the *Biographia Literaria*, approaching the question mainly from the philosophical standpoint, laid the stress upon imagination, but became involved in the metaphysics of imagination, and in an attempted distinction between imagination and fancy, which is little more than a matter of degree. In his later life he fell back upon what he called his 'homely definitions' of prose and poetry, that is, for prose, 'words in their best order', and for poetry, 'the best words in their best order'. That does not help us much, since by 'the best words' Coleridge can only mean the best words, not for prose, but for poetry, which remains undefined. More recently A. E. Housman has declined to attempt an intellectual definition of poetry, and confined himself to describing the physical reactions which it evoked in him. He thought the production of poetry 'less an active than a passive and involuntary process', and, if he must classify it, would call it a 'secretion'.

I, certainly, do not intend to attempt a watertight definition, where so many have failed. But at least we may accept it that in poetry there are two psychological elements involved. One is that of emotion, originally evoked by something given to the mind from without, either through the perception of an object, such as a landscape or a flower, or through reflection on a fact of life itself, such as birth or love or death; and intensified in the completed product by the operation of the second element, the creative process of imagination, already perhaps involved in perception or reflection themselves, even if we do not accept the view of Coleridge that it is 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.

To take a very simple example. The poet starts from the fact of a field full of yellow daffodils. He has a perception of them, and their beauty causes emotion. Imagination gets to work. The yellow is of gold. The daffodils are a host; they are serried; they wave banners. New images come in and displace this. They are stars in the Milky Way. They are dancers. Both imagination and emotion are renewed in solitude. I am a dancer too. My heart dances with them. Poetry then is a complex, of something given from without, and something transforming it from within. It is *Homo additus naturae*. Aristotle, like Tasso, was already conscious

of the creative element in it, and notes that *Poiesis* is ‘making’ something, and for the full analysis of the interaction of emotion and imagination in poetry, we must go to the psychologists, notably to Samuel Alexander, in his lucid and illuminating book on *Beauty and Other Forms of Value*, although I think that he rather tends to over-emphasize the element of imagination as compared with that of emotion.

Poetry is of course a form of art, and the impulse to poetry, as to any other form of art, is part of the impulse to beauty, one of the three great impulses which, according to the philosophers, make up the humanity of man, and according to some of them, bring man into contact with the divine. The others are the impulse to knowledge and the impulse to righteousness. Of the interaction between these civilization is the outcome. But the three impulses are not equally progressive. Knowledge grows, but righteousness does not seem to keep pace with it. Knowledge gave us the theory of the internal-combustion engine, but our roads are a shambles, and civilization itself is now at stake. This is by the way. My immediate point is that the impulse to beauty also seems to be an unprogressive one. We know more than the Greeks, but we do not make more beautiful things, or write more beautiful poetry. That is a large part of what I mean by the timelessness of poetry. The forms of expression vary. Difficulties of dialect intervene. But essentially, throughout the ages, all poets use the same language, and are intelligible to one another. They acknowledge a common ancestry. Poetry comes down to us, like the blossoms. Mr. De La Mare has said what I want to say for me, far better than I can say it for myself. It takes a poet to speak properly of poetry.

Very old are the woods;
And the buds that break
Out of the briar’s boughs,
When March winds wake,
So old with their beauty are—
Oh, no man knows
Through what wild centuries
Roves back the rose.

Very old are we men;
Our dreams are tales
Told in dim Eden
By Eve’s nightingales.

My distinguished namesake, Dr. R. W. Chambers, has written, with far more learning than I can claim, an admirable essay on

the continuity of English prose, from its beginnings to the Renaissance. I wish that I could similarly emphasize the continuity of English poetry, not only in itself, but in relation to the long story of classical and romance poetry that came before it. Many of my hearers are no doubt teachers of English literature, and are accustomed to classify it by periods, starting, I dare say, in view of the linguistic difficulties, not much earlier than Chaucer, or perhaps *Piers Plowman*, and conscientiously tracing the development through the Renaissance to a culmination in Shakespeare; then noting the new factors due to the emergence of the wit of Donne, and the French influence brought in by Dryden, lamenting perhaps the more prosaic age of reason dominated by Pope, and so on to the rise of what is called the romantic ideal, which has remained the dominant force in poetry down to our own day. That is, no doubt, a useful exercise. Anything, indeed, will do as a scaffolding, so long as it is not forgotten that the dominant purpose is to bring the young mind, in one way or another, directly into contact with poetry itself. But there are dangers in the historic method. The categories may easily become too rigid. There are waves, but the continuity of the tide is unbroken. This is very apparent in the wisely balanced study of Professor Elton's *The English Muse*. The period of Dryden, if it may be so called, does not begin until about the middle of the seventeenth century, and during the earlier part of it Vaughan, King, Marvell, Lovelace, Rochester, and others were still singing, to those who had ears to hear. Above all, Milton, as Professor Elton puts it, was working, 'alone in that mental solitude, which seems to be required for the production of great art'. I gather that my distinguished predecessor in this office has little use for Milton, at any rate in his longer poems. Well, we all have our blind spots for poetry. Mine will, no doubt, become apparent before this discourse is finished. And, of course, even in the most prosaic days, Shakespeare never lost his dominance. Dryden was unwearyed in praising him, not indeed without criticism, some of which was justifiable. Both Pope and Johnson edited him—badly, it is true—but that was for want of philological equipment rather than for want of sympathy.

However, the prosaic period, in so far as it was one, may be said to have lasted to the middle of the eighteenth century. But long before there had begun what Professor Elton calls a 'timid' return to nature, which was intensified later through the influence of Milton, after all more enduring than that of Pope, on Collins, Gray, Cowper, and lesser writers. It was reinforced by the in-

terest in balladry due to Percy's edition of the *Reliques of English Poetry* in 1765, and by the end of the century the so-called romantic revival was in full swing. But here, too, I think, it is possible to over-emphasize the breach of continuity. The way had been smoothed for the romanticists by their immediate predecessors. Coleridge, of course, was strongly influenced by the ballad-writers, but Wordsworth derived more obviously from Milton and Shakespeare. The most marked revolutionary was Blake, who definitely tilted for the imagination as against the reason.

Let us, however, admit that there was a period when, for their sins, men preferred versified prose to poetry. That is in any case no obstacle to the doctrine of the continuity, the timelessness, of poetry, in so far as poetry is to be found. Anywhere, throughout the ages, you may suddenly turn a page, and become conscious of its stab. And this continuity, or at least one aspect of it, may be further illustrated by the recurrence, century after century, of certain familiar themes, which have moved men's minds from the beginning, and, for all we know, will move them to the end.

Take, for example, the theme of Helen of Troy. The mythologists tell us that in origin she may have been divine, a *Koré* or earth maiden and mother, somewhere in the Aegean. The legend of her rape by Paris may have arisen in Thessaly. She was worshipped in Sparta, and her grave was shown to travellers, in a village hard by. But for us she is very human, the sheer creation of poetry itself. It was Homer who wrought the marvel. Leukōlenos, he calls her, Helen of the white arms. She has little part in the action of the *Iliad*, although the whole story revolves round her. In the third book she sits with Priam in a tower above the Skaian gate. The people grumble at the trouble she has brought upon the city, but they speak winged words as they gaze at her. 'Marvellous like she is to the immortal goddesses to look upon.' With Priam she watches the Greek warriors as they move in the plain below, and tells him their names. But she does not see her own brothers, Kastor the tamer of horses, and Polydeukes the boxer, and she knows not that them the life-giving earth holds fast in Lakedaimon, in their dear native land. She is unhappy in Troy. Her fancy for Paris has gone, and her only friends are old Priam and the generous-hearted Hector. At the end of the story, when Hector is dead, she is there to speak the last word of lamentation over his body. We meet her again in the *Odyssey*, in that remarkable and curiously modern episode, where Telemachus, in

search for his father Odysseus, comes to Sparta, and finds her there, restored to her husband Menelaus. There she sits,

The bright of women, Helen flowing-gowned,

just as any medieval or Elizabethan lady might sit, among her handmaids, with her work basket by her side. All that ancient trouble is now only a dim recollection, as she listens to the traveller's tale, and bids the couch be prepared for his repose.

Poetry has never forgotten Helen. Dante, of course, places her in the second circle of his terrible *Inferno*, among the carnal sinners, Helen, who was the centre of so many ills.

Elena vidi, per cui tanto reo
Tempo si volse.

But it is her beauty, not her frailty, which has endured. She comes very early into our own literature, in that curious *Love Rune* of the thirteenth-century Franciscan, Thomas de Hales, who probably had the story, not direct from Homer, but from one of his medieval re-writers. It is one of those many *Ubi Sunt* poems, in which the ecclesiastic imagination was wont to emphasize the nothingness of earthly life by a bead-roll of its vanished glories.

Where is Tristram, where is Hector? And with them,

Hwer is Paris and Heleyne
That weren so bryht and feyre on bleo,
Heo beoth i-glyden vt of the reyne,
So the schef is of the cleo.

And ever since, the memory of Helen has run like a golden thread through our literature. For Chaucer she is an exemplar of beauty, only to be outdone by the subject of his own songs.

Hyde ye youre beautes, Isoude and Eleyne,
My lady cometh, that all this may disteyne.

The Earl of Surrey knows her, but serves 'a worthier wight than she'. Shakespeare is sometimes cynical about her, not only in *Troilus and Cressida*, where he is cynical about everything, but also in *As You Like It*, where, according to Orlando, Rosalind has 'Helen's cheek, but not her heart', and in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Mercutio prophesies that Helen and Hero will be 'hildings and harlots', when Romeo comes with his verses to Juliet. Here, however, the cynicism falls upon Helen's poets rather than upon Helen herself, and amends are made in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the frantic lover

Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt,

and in the fifty-third *Sonnet*, where Shakespeare's friend is told,

On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new.

Marlowe, like Goethe after him, brings Helen into the Faust legend.

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.

She is in that rather unexpectedly lovely adieu to earth's bliss of the filibustering Nashe, written during a time of pestilence in London.

Beauty is but a flower
Which wrinkles will devour;
Brightness falls from the air;
Queens have died young and fair;
Death hath closed Helen's eye;
I am sick, I must die—
Lord have mercy on us !

Campion dreams of the death of his lady.

When thou must home to shades of underground,
And there arrived, a new admired guest,
The beauteous spirits do engirt thee round,
White Iopé, blithe Helen, and the rest.

In later years, when the classical influence on our literature becomes strong again, Helen is particularly dear to Landor. Three of his longer poems dwell on her story, and her name is linked with that of his beloved Ianthe.

Past ruin'd Ilion Helen lives,
Alcestis rises from the shades;
Verse calls them forth; 'tis verse that gives
Immortal youth to mortal maids.

Soon shall Oblivion's deepening veil
Hide all the peopled hills you see,
The gay, the proud, while lovers hail
In distant ages you and me.

The tear for fading beauty check,
For passing glory cease to sigh;
One form shall rise above the wreck,
One name, Ianthe, shall not die.

Landor, I think, of all our earlier romantics, comes closest to the classical manner. Nor have our later poets forgotten Helen,

notably Dr. Mackail, in his beautiful verses, *On the Death of Arnold Toynbee*.

Thus were the ancient days
 Made like our own monotonous with grief;
 From unassuaged lips even thus hath flown
 Perpetually the immemorial moan
 Of those that weeping went on desolate ways,
 Nor found in tears relief.

For faces yet grow pale,
 Tears rise at fortune, and true hearts take fire
 In all who hear, with quickening pulse's stroke,
 That cry that from the infinite people broke,
 When third among them Helen led the wail
 At Hector's funeral pyre.

So long as our poetry lives, Helen will not be lost to it—‘not Helen at the Skaian gate’.

A second constant in poetry is the note of the nightingale. Mr. De La Mare, in the lines I have already quoted, puts it in Eden, and no doubt Eve named the bird. The ancients had a rather savage legend, Thracian, not pure Hellenic, by origin, in which King Tereus ravishes his sister-in-law Philomela, and cuts out her tongue to silence her. She reveals the secret in a piece of needle-work to his sister Procne, who in revenge kills his son Itylus, and offers his flesh to the father in a dish. The gods turn Tereus into a hoopoe, Philomela into a swallow, and Procne into a nightingale. The Latin writers, such as Ovid, inverted this, and made Philomela the nightingale. So it is in Swinburne's *Itylus*, but less clearly so in that beautiful chorus from *Atalanta in Calydon*, of which I am never wearied, although elsewhere Swinburne is often capable of boring me.

When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,
 The mother of months in meadow or plain
 Fills the shadows and windy places
 With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain;
 And the brown bright nightingale amorous
 Is half assuaged for Itylus,
 For the Thracian ships and the foreign faces,
 The tongueless vigil, and all the pain.

But the classical story does not seem to have influenced our own medieval poets of the nightingale. Chaucer, in *The Legend of Good Women*, has it briefly from Ovid, but leaves out the transformations. And before him the poets had made a fresh start with the

nightingale. For them she is the singer of human love, with its ecstasies and agonies. It is so, already, in two little pieces of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, found in a manuscript once belonging to Leominster Abbey in Herefordshire. 'Lenten is come with love to touné', one of them begins, and hails the 'dayses-eyes in the dales', and the 'notes suete of nyhtegales'. The other is more personal in its tone.

When the nyhtegale singes,
The wodes waxen grene,
Lef ant gras ant blosme springes
In Averyl, I wene;
Ant love is to myn herte gon
With one spere so kene,
Nyht and day my blod hit drynkes,
Myn herte deth to tene.

Secular poems of love are not very common in manuscripts of ecclesiastical origin, and I once suggested that, as the nightingale already links love and song in earlier French and Provençal literature, we might have here the reminiscences of this by some wandering English scholar on the Continent, who afterwards wrote them down among the apple-blossoms of his Herefordshire priory. But the more learned Professor Carleton Brown tells me that the poems in this manuscript are probably a collection from various sources.

Of about the same date or a little earlier is a poetical debate between *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The nightingale accuses the owl of singing about nothing but woe, while she herself rejoices. The owl replies that the nightingale's songs only encourage lust. She likes dirty perches and evil food. The nightingale defends herself. Her encouragement is all to lawful love. By the advice of the wren, the dispute is referred to the arbitration of Nicholas of Portisham in Dorset, who may be the author of the poem. Another debate, between *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, is also of the thirteenth century. The thrush denounces women; the nightingale defends them. In the fourteenth century the theme is taken up in *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, once ascribed to Chaucer, but now to a Sir John or Sir Thomas Clanvowe. The nightingale again upholds love, and the decision is left to a parliament to be held on St. Valentine's day. William Dunbar, in *The Merle and Nightingale*, gives a different turn to the topic. Here the merle praises human love, but the nightingale religious love.

All lufe is lost but vpone God allone.

Obviously, therefore, the English tradition of the nightingale, as it came down to the Renaissance, is that its song is of love. And so, of course, it is in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day:
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear;
Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate-tree:
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

But this night of love-ecstasy in Verona was only the prelude to the tragedy coming on. And it is this, perhaps, which has left later poets uncertain as to whether the note of the nightingale is really a joyous or a melancholy one. For Milton, in an early sonnet, it is 'amorous', and portends success in love, but in *Il Penseroso* 'most musical, most melancholy'. Coleridge, again, recorded the 'pity-pleading strains' in 1795, but by 1798 had recanted.

In Nature there is nothing melancholy.
But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
First named these notes a melancholy strain.
And many a poet echoes the conceit.

But for himself and his friends—

'Tis the merry Nightingale,
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warbles his delicious notes,
As he were fearful that an April night
Would be too short for him to utter forth
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
Of all its music.

Coleridge did not, however, impose his theory upon all who followed. Perhaps he was wiser when he said—

O Lady, we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live;
Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud.

Wordsworth takes a line of his own. The song for him is the stock-dove's; that of the nightingale

A song of mockery and despite
Of shades, and dews, and silent night;
And steady bliss, and all the loves
Now sleeping in these peaceful groves.

It is, of course, Keats who is most conscious of the note of continuity.

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn.

There is, however, nothing about the nightingale, or any other bird, in the *Book of Ruth*. With Christina Rossetti, thinking of death, we come back to the tragic nightingale.

I shall not see the shadows,
 I shall not feel the rain;
 I shall not hear the nightingale
 Sing on, as if in pain.

And it was left to a 'modern' poet to follow the lead of the thirteenth-century owl, and defame the nightingale's habits.

The nightingales are singing near
 The Convent of the Sacred Heart,
 And sang within the bloody wood
 When Agamemnon cried aloud,
 And let their liquid siftings fall
 To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.

W. B. Yeats says that these lines are written 'in the grand manner'. I can only reply that they make me squirm.

This brings me to a problem about which I must say a few words, although not very many. How far is my doctrine of the continuity, the timelessness, of poetry applicable to modern poetry? It is a difficult question to answer, because we cannot see our contemporaries, as we can their predecessors, in perspective. Mr. F. L. Lucas has written an interesting book on *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal*. I am not clear that romanticism has fallen, although Mr. Lucas shows that in its later stages it has sometimes developed tendencies to neuroticism. Yeats, although he had a questing soul, and tried many manners, remained at heart, I think, a romantic to the end. Byzantium is, after all, only an outpost of Hellas. If there has been a revolt against tradition, it has perhaps been more obvious in critical theories about poetry than in poetry itself. The theorists are well discussed in Sir Henry Newbolt's *A New Study of English Poetry* (1919), and again later in Mr. John Sparrow's *Sense and Poetry* (1934). Here are described a number of schools of 'new' poetry, which have arisen, largely

in France and America, during the last half-century, and have produced manifestoes as to the lines on which they think that poetry ought to be written. Symbolists, Imagists, Futurists, Dadaists, Surrealists—they have followed each other in rapid succession. There is a good deal of the *blague* of the Paris studios about some of their utterances. But, taken as a whole, they do imply an attempt to treat the poetry of tradition as a closed account. Romance is dubbed ‘escapism’—not a very scholarly word-formation. ‘We must have done’, say the Futurists, with ‘the dead weight of the past’, with ‘the obsession of antiquity and Classicism’. It ignores ‘the complete renewal of human sensibility, which has taken place since the great scientific discoveries’. Life has now a quick rhythm. The poet’s imagination must therefore be ‘a wireless imagination’, an ‘entire freedom of images and analogies, expressed by disjointed words and without the connecting wires of syntax’. And love-poetry is out of date. ‘The lover, pure and simple, has lost his absolute prestige.’ ‘Love has lost its absolute value.’ The Abbé Brémond again, a Symbolist, wanted a ‘pure poetry’, obtaining its effects by suggestion alone, without the mediation of the intellect. It should be an experience akin to prayer, working through a mysterious quality residing in words—not in their sound, or rhythmical arrangement, still less in their intelligible content. We are far, you see, from the romantic Walter Pater’s wise emphasis on the ‘hard logical or quasi-prosaic excellence that verse has or needs’. Some echo of these exotic doctrines has drifted from overseas, and affected even English criticism, traditionally sane. A writer from one of our universities, not that to which I have the honour to belong, opines that a new technique is required, ‘adequate to the ways of feeling, or modes of experience, of adult, sensitive moderns’. It must ‘develop (if at all) along some other line than that running from the Romantics, through Tennyson, Swinburne, *A Shropshire Lad*, and Rupert Brooke’. And apparently it is to start from Mr. T. S. Eliot. The same pundit tells us that the first two anthologies called *Poems of To-day*, issued by this Association, ‘hardly contain five good poems between them’. I wish he had named the four exceptions.

Frankly, I do not believe that poetry can be written in accordance with a scholastic theory, whether it is elaborated in Paris, or in Harvard, or in Cambridge. As Keats said, ‘If Poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.’ And although there have been some extravagances in modern English poetry, I do not believe that in bulk it is quite as bad as the spinners of theories would make it. ‘In fact’, says Newbolt, ‘it is

rare, even to-day to find English poetry in which there is no trace of any meaning.' There is 'incoherence', but not 'complete unintelligibility'. I would add that even love and natural beauty are sometimes allowed to creep in. After all, men and women do still mate, although perhaps not so permanently as of old. Dawn still follows eve, and the flowers come, more or less, in their seasons. And the poets, however much they affect the manner of the wireless, cannot help being aware of these things. I am not much troubled by the fact that they are often obsessed with theories of social reorganization. A poet's politics are perhaps the least important thing about him. The chief defect, I think, lies in an imperfect feeling for rhythm. Free verse is no novelty. Milton used it in its rhymed form, and Arnold in its unrhymed. But it requires a strong sense of rhythm to do without the incantation which a recurrent stanza-form brings.

In conclusion, I will emphasize my own impression of the timelessness, the continuity, of poetry, by reading the two pieces which have most affected me recently, when I came across them for the first time. One is a late fifteenth-century poem, in which the word-terminations have rather broken down. It is a movement, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, from *The Lover's Mass*.

Worshyppe to that lord above,
That callyd ys the god of love,
Pes to hys seruantes euerychon,
Trewe of herte, stable as ston,
That feythal be.

To hertys trewe of ther corage,
That lyst chaunge for no rage,
But kep hem in ther hestys stylle,
In all maner wedris ylle,
Pes, concord and vnyte.

God send hem sone ther desyrs
And reles of ther hoote ffyrs
That brenneth at her herte sore,
And encresseth more and more,
This my prayere.

And after wynter wyth hys shourys
God send hem counfort of May flourys,
Affter gret wynd and stormys kene,
The glade sonne with bemys shene
May appere,

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To yive hem lyght after dyrknesse,
 Joye eke after hevynesse;
 And after dool and ther wepynge,
 To here the somer foullys syng,
 God yive grace.

For ofte sythe men ha seyn
 A ful bryght day after gret reyn,
 And tyl the storme be leyd asyde,
 The herdys vnder bussh abyde,
 And taketh place.

After also the dirke nyght,
 Voyde off the Mone and sterre lyght,
 And after nyghtys dool and sorowe,
 Folweth ofte a ful glade morowe
 Of Auenture.

Now lorde, that knowest hertys alle
 Off louers that for helpe calle,
 On her trouthe of mercy rewe,
 Namly on swyche as be trewe.

Help to recure.

Amen.

The other is Mr. Hilaire Belloc's *Ha'nacker Mill*.¹

Sally is gone that was so kindly,
 Sally is gone from Ha'nacker Hill.

And the Briar grows ever since then so blindly

And ever since then the clapper is still,
 And the sweeps have fallen from Ha'nacker Mill.

Ha'nacker Hill is in Desolation:

Ruin a-top and a field unploughed.

And Spirits that call on a fallen nation

Spirits that loved her calling aloud:

Spirits abroad in a windy cloud.

Spirits that call and no one answers;

Ha'nacker 's down and England 's done.

Wind and Thistle for pipe and dancers

And never a ploughman under the Sun.

Never a ploughman. Never a one.

Nearly five centuries divide these two poems, but both, when I first read them, gave me the same authentic thrill, although I do not know that my physical reactions were exactly the same as A. E. Housman's.

8 JUNE, 1940

¹ From SONNETS AND VERSE (1938 Edn.), Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd.

